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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the cultural roles of Indian women in the past and the translation of those roles in today's world. Historically, the Indian woman was educated by her mother and other older women to assume duties ranging from wife and mother to respected counselor, medicine woman, and warrior. Contact with White explorers and settlers made the course of life unpredictable and forced women to find within themselves the adaptive mechanisms to maintain, expand, or revise traditional roles. Contemporary Indian women remain primarily responsible for childrearing. On reservations this responsibility can be shared, but women who have moved to urban areas seeking economic advancement leave the security of the extended family network. Women who find themselves in positions of authority in the work place or tribal government may have difficulty in changing roles from subordinate to superior in their dealings with men. Others are forced to choose between career and marriage as they strive to maintain self-determination and self-esteem. In addition to coping with role and values conflicts, Indian women must also overcome stereotypical characterizations, such as the "squaw" facing a life of misery and servitude or the romantic Indian "princess." Neither stereotype is complimentary, as both deny the existence of self-determination in the Indian woman. The ways in which Indian women deal with stereotypes and cultural role conflicts may be viewed as an important adaptive mechanism that may be applied to other personal problems. (SV)

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Cultural and Historical Perspectives Concerning American Indian Women

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Cultural and Historical Perspectives

Concerning American Indian Women

"Pity the poor squaw,
Beast of burden, slave,
Chained under female law
From puberty to grave."
(cited in Terrell & Terrell, 1974)

The anonymous author of this poem was obviously influenced by misconceptions about Indian women. Misconceptions produced by biased information and unintentionally spread by thoughtless or uninformed persons. Much as my pioneer grandmothers were chained to the responsibilities of home and family, so were my Indian grandmothers chained. But never were those chains so strong they could not be broken or so heavy they could not be carried. To so simplistically attribute such a demeaning role to all Indian women is not only incorrect but is insulting to the self-determination and self-sufficiency evident in native women of the past and present.

Indian women are not easily described. Their actions tend to reflect the demands of tribal lifestyle and traditions and to accomodate the demands of the times in which they live. To illustrate the differences among Indian women, I would like to call your attention to the members of this symposium panel. Before you, you see women from the Kiowa, Shawnee,

Caddo, Miami, Kickapoo, Cherokee, and Creek tribes. We are definitely a diverse group in terms of tribal history, culture, and traditions as well as family, personality, goals, and expectations. The roles we fulfill and the ways in which we have been taught to fulfill them differ. Yet we share important commonalities. We are descendants of the same race and members of the same sex. In that respect we share a common bond found in the sisterhood of American Indian women.

With this in mind, my purpose here is not to provide a catalogue of traditional women's duties for the hundreds of tribes in the United States. My intent is to, in broad terms, first examine the cultural roles of Indian women in the past and then to discuss the translation of those roles into today's world. I will also mention in this discussion two prominent stereotypical characterizations of Indian women, princess and squaw. Through this process, I hope to encourage sensitivity in those who work with Indian women to the diversity as well as some of the common aspects of tradition and culture which may impact these women.

Cuturally Prescribed Roles in History

To understand Indian women today, it is important to first get some idea of the boundaries within which Indian women in the past lived.

In the beginning, roles were set and unchanging. An Indian woman could, with fair certainty, predict the course of her life and the various roles she would assume. In her youth she would stay by her mother's side learning the skills necessary for the survival of her future family. She would be taught that she should and could be subordinate to men without losing dignity or self-esteem. She would spend time with her grandmothers and from them learn spiritual wisdom. In her childbearing years, she would be a wife and mother and would respect and care for her husband. In certain tribes these would be the years in which she would take an active role in the selection of tribal leaders and would sit in council to those leaders. In other tribes, she might assume the role of medicine woman or, in certain Western tribes, warrior and divide her time between her duties to family and those to the tribe. In her old age, she would be called "Grandmother" and would be respected for her accomplishments and the wisdom of a lifetime. These were her expectations and the

expectations which were handed from mother to daughter, in the beginning.

Contact with early European exploreres, adventurers, and settlers changed all of this. The Indian woman could no longer predict the course of her life. Those tribes located in close proximity to white settlements were the first to absorb some of the values of white society. Native women were influenced by their white counterparts and even more so by white missionaries. They could no longer rely on mothers and grandmothers to provide their education, but began to attend boarding schools and to marry white trappers, traders, and settlers. Only those tribes more nomadic in nature were able to avoid, for a time, the crush of a white society spurred by visions of Manifest Destiny.

Thus, for the native woman diversity and adaptation characterized her roles in both Indian and white society. She, historically, assumed duties ranging from wife and mother to respected councillor, medicine woman, and warrior. She also had to find within herself adaptive mechanisms to successfully maintain, expand, and revise these roles in response to the demands of a changing society (Hanson, 1980).

Culturally Prescribed Roles Today

The translation of early roles into roles applicable to women of today is sometimes confusing and often difficult. Her role as wife and mother remains unchanging, yet the economic realities of today require that she, along with women in general, make job and career a priority. Therefore, in speaking of cultural perspectives of today's Indian women, I will focus on two aspects of traditionality which changing societal and economic demands have influenced, childrearing and the subordination of women to men. I will also briefly discuss the princess and squaw characterizations which Indian women must, in many instances, overcome.

Contemporary Indian women remain primarily responsible for childrearing. When living on or near reservations or close to tribal lands and family, these responsibilities can be shared and even single parents find the responsibility less burdensome (Beiswinger & Jeanotte, 1985). However, the documented flight from rural America has evidenced itself in the Indian population as well as the general U.S. population. More Indian families continue to move from rural and reservation areas to large cities across the country. Many of these families are single-parent families with the mother as head of household (CSR Incorporated,

1986). Rural to urban moves are generally viewed as moves toward greater economic security, but they may also be moves away from the security provided by the extended family network. In this way the urban Indian woman often finds herself cut off from those people and customs which provided spiritual sustenance and social outlets.

The Indian woman may have been traditionally taught, by example or otherwise, to be subordinate to men, but many women are finding themselves in positions of authority in the work place and in tribal government. Some have difficulty in moving from the role of subordinate to the role of superior when dealing with male co-workers. Others are being forced to make choices between career and marriage as they strive to maintain self-determination and self-esteem (Hanson, 1980). To be economically successful, these women must live within the constraints of the dominant culture, but to maintain a sense of cultural identity they must respect the old traditions. The difficulty lies in a compromise of values which the woman may or may not choose to make.

Besides the difficulty encountered in developing ways in which to cope with sometimes opposing role requirements, Indian women must also overcome

stereotypical characterizations. Whereas the anonymous poet suggests that an Indian "squaw" faces a life of misery and servitude, a second prominent stereotype tends to romanticize Indian women according to white standards. This particular stereotype has been noted by several authors in terms of the "Indian Princess or Pocahantas syndrome" (Galloway, 1987; Green, 1975; Medicine, 1981). The goal of the princess is the attainment of high status in the white culture. As she approaches this goal, she pays a price in loss of credibility within her own culture and becomes, in essence, a social outcast.

Unfortunately, native women are consistently characterized as one or the other, princess or squaw. Neither seems complimentary as they both deny the existence of self-determination in the Indian woman. Interestingly, both stereotypes are the products of early ethnographic reports collected by male ethnographers. Because of the prohibition in many tribes against women talking to male visitors, information about their lives was provided by male tribal members. Based on such evidence of bias, critics (e.g. Green, 1975; Lurie, 1961; Medicine, 1981; Terrell & Terrell, 1974) of these early accounts suggest that their veracity is questionable. With this in mind,

it seems the time has come to drop such characterizations and accept Indian women as individuals capable of determining their own futures and places in society.

Biographical and autobiographical accounts of Indian women (i.e. Lurie, 1961) provide more realistic views of the roles these women played within their tribes and culture. The lives of Indian women in history closely paralleled those of pioneer women. Women congregated separately from men at social gatherings and spent the majority of their time with children and other women. They held responsibility for the care of their children and their homes while deriving strength from a sense of self-determination, a knowledge that their roles as mothers and grandmothers were valued within the tribe and a trust in their spiritual beliefs.

Conclusions

In summary, those who work with Indian people, in general, and particularly Indian women, should be aware of the stereotypical characterizations, princess or squaw which still exist, the role and values conflicts they face, and, in general, the diversity of Indian women.

The denial of self-determination and freedom of choice which underlies the princess and squaw stereotypes should be considered when thinking of Indian women. By viewing us through such narrow and clouded windows, people fail to see a complete and clear picture of the variety of colorful and interesting Indian women found in all walks of life.

For the native woman, the demands of society are sometimes in conflict with the demands of tradition creating confusion and difficulty in maintaining cultural roles. The ways in which Indian women deal with such conflict may be viewed as important adaptive devices that may be used in treatment of other personal problems which arise.

Traditions and cultural norms vary extensively among American Indian people. Those discussed here are but a small sampling of the variety of women's duties or roles which have been passed from mother to daughter since the beginning of time.

Throughout this paper I have suggested the diversity of American Indian women. I would like to close, however, with a poem that speaks of the common bond of sisterhood referred to earlier. The poem, written by a Cherokee-Creek woman named Julia Gibson, was found printed on a bookmark stuck in the back of one

of the books which provided some of the material I have presented today. When I read it, I thought that it seemed highly appropriate that I should find such thoughts in my search for more information on the traditions and cultural roles of Indian women. The poem is entitled "Sweat Lodge" .

Sweat Lodge

"To all my relations"
I whisper as I enter
Clock wise motion
My bare skin shivers
Against the cold
We are Sisters
of Different Tribes
We sit side by side
In a circle
The Red Hot Rocks Enter
The smoke of the Cedar
And Sweet grass
Purify the Sisters
of Different Tribes
It is Dark
Like the womb
I hear the Female Water
Covering the Red Hot Rocks
I feel the Warmth
of the Hot Steam
Touch my bare Body
I feel the Sweat
Pouring from my Body
The Sisters of Different Tribes
Become One
As we talk to
The Creator

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